

MYRON HARMON SWENK  
1883-1941

BY JOHN T. ZIMMER

MYRON HARMON SWENK, Chairman of the Department of Entomology at the University of Nebraska, died at his home in Lincoln, Nebraska, on July 17, 1941. He was born at Polo, Illinois, on August 8, 1883, the son of Howard Swenk and Susanne Harmon Swenk. In 1885, the family moved to Beatrice, Nebraska, in whose public schools Myron received his preparatory education, graduating from the Beatrice High School in 1901. That year the family moved to Lincoln, where he entered the University of Nebraska and began his studies in the Department of Entomology under Professor Lawrence Bruner. He graduated with the degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1907 and received that of Master of Arts in 1908.

While an undergraduate, in 1904, Myron became Laboratory Assistant in Entomology. He was raised to the position of Adjunct Professor in 1907, Assistant Professor in 1910, Associate Professor in 1911, Professor of Economic Entomology in 1914, and Professor of Entomology in 1925, and was made Chairman of the Department of Entomology in 1919, in which capacity he served until July, 1941, a short time before his death, when ill health compelled his retirement from active duty. He also served the University on various committees and from 1912 to 1928 was Chairman of the Committee on Graduate Work on the Agricultural College Campus.

In addition to his pedagogical work, he was long associated with the Nebraska Agricultural Experiment Station, as Assistant Station Entomologist (1913-1919) and Entomologist (1919), and was also Assistant State Entomologist (1908-1919) and State Entomologist (1919-1927).

On April 24, 1918, he married Jane Chandler Bishop of Lincoln who, with his father and a sister, Iva Swenk, also of Lincoln, survives him.

Myron Swenk's chosen profession was entomology and his work in this subject, aside from his classroom activities, was primarily in the economic field, as was but natural in view of his official positions in an agricultural state. His numerous publications on economic entomology were begun while he was still an undergraduate student and continued throughout his lifetime, but they alone do not measure the full extent of his services to the farmers of Nebraska. The problems of the control of the insect enemies of the fields and orchards were his constant study. As a taxonomist, he was interested primarily in the bees, and most of his papers on systematic entomology deal with that group of insects. Their role in the pollination of plants was a phase of the subject that, from early years, drew his careful attention.

Entomology was closely seconded by ornithology as an avocation in which Professor Swenk played a very active part throughout his lifetime. He was one of the founders of the Nebraska Ornithologists' Union when it was instituted on December 16, 1899. He was elected its President in 1907-1908, Secretary in 1908-1910, Secretary-Treasurer in 1910-1912 and again from 1915 to 1937, and Editor-Custodian (1938-1941). He secured the affiliation of the Union with the Wilson Ornithological Club (1915) and served as President of the Club for the year 1918-1919. When the affiliation terminated in 1925 and *The Wilson Bulletin* ceased to be the official organ of the Union, he began the issue of a series of mimeographed "Letters of Information," of which sixty-eight numbers appeared. They contained the records of the activities of the Union and its members and supplied the place of a printed journal until *The Nebraska Bird Review* was initiated in 1933. The *Review* he continued to edit until early 1941. Thus, from the founding of the Nebraska Ornithologists' Union until his death, he served the society in one capacity or another and was editor of its publications for most of that time.

In 1904, under the joint authorship of Lawrence Bruner, Robert H. Wolcott, and Myron Swenk, there was published "A Preliminary Review of the Birds of Nebraska." This consisted of an annotated list of the birds recorded from the state, with keys for their identification; remarks on their distribution, seasonal occurrence, and abundance; and with citations of the records of the more uncommon forms. The account appeared in the Annual Report of the Nebraska State Board of Agriculture for the year 1903 and was immediately reissued in book form. It became the standard work of reference on Nebraska birds. Various additions and corrections have been published from time to time, several from the pen of Myron Swenk himself, but no more comprehensive account has appeared, and the book has not been supplanted. For many years, Swenk had in mind a complete descriptive work on the birds of the state, but it was not found possible to finance the undertaking, and it was never carried to completion. The biographer still has in his possession a portion of the manuscript notebooks that mark an early joint effort to assemble certain data for such a work.

Perhaps realizing that the more ambitious undertaking was out of the question, Professor Swenk began, in 1933, two series of articles in *The Nebraska Bird Review* entitled, respectively, "A History of Nebraska Ornithology" and "A Brief Synopsis of the Birds of Nebraska." These undoubtedly would have brought together a great deal of scattered information on the local bird life, but only four instalments of the "History" and three of the "Synopsis" were published before the author's death. Other articles from his pen were, however, both numerous and varied, ranging from simple records of local occurrences to such comprehensive studies as that on the Eskimo

Curlew (1915), the Whooping Crane (1933), the measurements of the geese of the *Branta canadensis* group (1934, 1935) and other important studies. Whatever the subjects or their importance, the articles are marked by the accuracy and careful attention to detail that characterize all of Myron Swenk's work.

Professor Swenk was interested in mammals to a somewhat lesser degree than in birds, but he has to his credit "A Preliminary Review of the Mammals of Nebraska" (1908), with three subsequent revisions of the list (1915, 1918, and 1920), and a number of other papers of taxonomic or economic interest, including the descriptions of five new mammalian subspecies. In 1939, he began a privately published series of papers on mammals under the general title of "Missouri Valley Fauna," of which three numbers appeared before his death.

He was affiliated with numerous scientific organizations including the American Association for the Advancement of Science, American Association of Economic Entomologists, American Ornithologists' Union, American Society of Mammalogists, Cooper Ornithological Club, Ecological Society of America, Nebraska Academy of Science, Nebraska Ornithologists' Union, Wildlife Society, and Wilson Ornithological Club, and the honorary societies of Alpha Zeta, Gamma Sigma Delta, Phi Sigma, and Sigma Xi.

As a teacher, Professor Swenk was exceptionally successful. His knowledge of his subject was profound, his manner of presentation clear and forceful, and he had the gift of inspiring his students to their best efforts. As a companion in the field he was genial, interesting, and alert, and it is a pleasure to recall many hours spent with him in past years, roaming the woods and fields, watching birds, collecting specimens, and discussing problems of mutual interest.

From his boyhood he was a keen, though conservative, collector, and he succeeded in building up an important private collection of some thousands of birds, mammals, and insects of the Missouri Valley region. After his death, the insects were presented by Mrs. Swenk to the Department of Entomology at the University of Nebraska, and the birds and mammals to the Nebraska State Museum. Mrs. Swenk has since expended considerable time and effort in cataloguing the birds and mammals in their new quarters and it is gratifying to know that, through her generosity, this material, of special value to Nebraskans, will remain in the state, accessible to students in the region. Local students will, however, miss the presence of Myron Swenk in person. His was the lasting flame that kept alight through the changing years of the Nebraska Ornithologists' Union and his the spirit that kept the organization a growing one. More than anyone, he made the Union his own, and the history of the organization for forty years is inextricably bound up with him. It will miss his guiding hand, his fund of information, and his unflinching interest in local problems which was at the service of Nebraska students. He left a foundation for

future work in the region for which all those who remain to carry on his work will feel extremely grateful.

In *The Nebraska Bird Review* (Vol. 10, No. 1: 6-15, July 7, 1942) will be found a bibliography of Myron Swenk's publications prepared by Dr. H. Douglas Tate, and in the same number (pp. 15-22) an additional paper (with Edson Fichter) on "The Distribution and Migration of the Solitary Sandpiper in Nebraska."

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BIRD MIGRATION. By A. Landsborough Thomson. H. F. and G. Witherby, Ltd., 326 High Holborn, London, W. C. 1. 1942: 7 x 4½ in., 192 pp.; 7 photographs and 13 maps. 6s.

In this revised edition, Landsborough Thomson has brought up to date the useful short account of bird migration he originally published in 1936. Type for the new volume has been more closely set, reducing the total number of pages but not the text. The new edition is also printed on a cheap wartime pulp. About four pages of material and several maps have been added.

Ornithologists will be more interested in the new contents of the book than in its physical make-up. Brief accounts are given of the recent studies on homing (by Rüppell, Wodzicki, Lockley, and Griffin) and of the work of experimental biologists (Rowan, Bissonnette, and Wolfson). Mention is also made of the banding results of Nice, B. Roberts, R. J. Middleton, and others. These appear to be the three fields of inquiry currently yielding the most significant facts on bird migration.

Popular books on this subject have one fault in common. Designed for the general reader, they emphasize "the immensity of migration" and its complexity, and suggest little to the bird watcher in the way of concrete studies that he himself can carry out in the field. To a considerable extent this is attributable to the ideal of condensation that has governed recent books on bird migration. F. C. Lincoln summed up the subject in about 65,000 words in 1939; Thomson here covers it in about 50,000. Such a condensation also necessitates the omission of many aspects of a field that is admittedly complex. To the reviewer, the present volume is regrettably vague on the subject of the periodic irruptions studied by Gross, Formosof, and Speirs.

In spite of this, the book can be considered the best general statement of bird migration now available for the layman. Although British birds have deliberately been allowed to predominate as examples, a check of the excellent index reveals that about 43 per cent of the species listed are probably known to the average bird student in North America. Supplemented by Lincoln's pamphlet of 1935 (U. S. Dept. of Agriculture Circular, 363), it therefore offers American readers an inexpensive and up-to-date summary of the general features of bird migration and of our present theories on the subject.—J. J. Hickey.